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WHAT CONCEPTION OF THE SCRIPTURES AND OF SCRIPTURE AUTHORITY SHOULD UNDERLIE THE WORK OF THE MODERN MISSIONARY?

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Fourteen Years a Missionary in China

In this our day, for the first time in a millennium and a half, for the first time indeed since their first encounter, Christianity and the great ethnic religions stand confronting each other, face to face. A procession of new nations is coming on the stage, their religious systems continuing their ministrations unabashed in the presence of Christianity. Their commerce, politics, and literature, their merchants and travelers, their schools and science, their achievements in war and peace, all certify that the messengers of Christianity to these eastern nations are to encounter systems possessing the vital elements of religion in no small measure.

If these ethnic systems are stronger and purer than any Christianity ever met before, so also is Christianity better able to match herself with them than ever before. The distance that separates the men of today from the men of yesterday, which John Fiske tells us is an immeasurably wider gulf than ever before divided one generation of men from their predecessors, measures advance, not retrogression. The age, to be sure, is skeptical regarding the antique. It calls for the facts, and heeds no dictation. It has forgotten its theology, it doubts the divinity of church machinery. But it is inspired with a worthier conception of Jesus, with a clearer vision of the coming social order which, on the manward side, is the equivalent of the Kingdom of Heaven, and with a deeper consciousness of God, than any generation since the men who personally knew Jesus. It defines its missionary work as nothing less than bringing the world into living, personal relations with God, continuing, so far as in us lies, the work of Jesus, who, in the profound words of Adolf Harnack, sought to bring every man face to face with God—God and the soul, the soul and its God.

In rising to its new responsibilities, Christianity, when fairly confronted with the question, recognizes the propriety of leaving behind any elements that are local, temporary, or accretionary, that it may go unencumbered on its errand. If God were to give us a new Paul we hold it certain that he would refuse to carry abroad accretions dear to the western Christian heart, just as he would not carry to Europe the rites, sabbaths, and festivals dear to the Jewish Christian heart.

It need not be said that the missionary's conception of Scripture should be the best, the truest, within his power to reach; such as best comports with historical facts and with the spirit of Christianity, so far as modern research can establish them.

Time was, and still is, when the Scriptures were conceived of as a body of pure divine truth directly and miraculously communicated. Portions of them were traced by the finger of God on stone tablets. Other portions were dictated from heaven as to an amanuensis, or communicated as by a spiritualistic trance. If, as some prefer to say, the thought and language were suggested rather than dictated, the same result is reached: we hold in our hands, especially in the original manuscripts, the veritable dictations of the voice of God, inerrant, infallible, and of absolute authority, the only and complete rule of life and conduct.

Large parts of this body of oracles relate to cosmogony, astronomy, angelology, and demonology; beasts, birds, and reptiles discourse in human language; sea-monsters, sun, moon, and stars, storms, and oceans, act as allies of the representatives of God; governmental, priestly, and sacrificial systems are elaborated to the last degree; and all is by the direct voice and authority of God.

This conception of an inspired, inerrant, and authoritative scripture, a legacy from the rabbis, remained unchallenged down to the Reformation. For a time the reformers asserted a certain unorthodox liberty with the Bible, notably Martin Luther, who said portions of the New Testament were no better than straw; but the exigencies of controversy soon stiffened up the relaxing orthodoxy. The Catholics claimed the support of an infallible authority, the pope. The reformers replied, No, it is not the pope, it is the Bible that is the viceroy of God, authorized to speak in his behalf. Both parties,

it will be observed, assumed an absent God, unable to speak in his own behalf.

This bibliolatry has prevailed down to nearly the present time. John Wesley held that to give up witchcraft, for instance, was to give up the Bible. Present-day encroachments on the time-honored conceptions have just now—July, 1907—drawn from the Roman Vatican a *Syllabus* condemning some sixty-five “grave errors” in modern biblical study, breaking thus the silence of nearly half a century since the famous encyclical of Pius IX against modern errors.

Shall protestant missions defend and perpetuate the dogma of the inerrancy of Scripture?

1. The first voice to challenge an inerrant scripture, within the English world at least, came from a missionary. Bishop Colenso of the English mission in South Africa, while engaged in the '60's in translating the Old Testament, found that his native helpers became puzzled over certain practical difficulties, such as the animals taken into the ark, their numbers, how the wild creatures were secured, how all were provided with their accustomed food; of whom Cain was afraid when he was outlawed; where he got his wife; the age of the antediluvians, and like questions. We smile, perhaps inconsistently, at these trivialities; they were serious enough then. The missionary did not smooth matters over, nor did he rebuke the impiety of these free-thinkers of the jungle, but with such means as were at hand he investigated. The result was that he told his people the Pentateuch narratives were plainly unhistorical, and had no more connection with Christianity than the stories of the Apocrypha. This view of the subject was not adopted by the mission board in London. The missionary was adjudged a heretic and deposed from his office. England rang with “the defection of Bishop Colenso,” but the scholarship of Holland was aroused, and soon the learning of Europe confirmed and extended the bold conclusions of the missionary and his African converts.

2. If we hold to the conception of the Scriptures as an unerring rule of life and conduct, it is difficult to avoid extenuating or apologizing for the low standards of conduct of many who are held up as models. Deceit, savagery, cruelty, treachery, lewdness, bulk larger and more prominently in the narrative than we like to think. Jacob

and his mother cheating Esau; Lot; the destruction of the Canaanites; the wholesale abandonment of Gentile wives and children ordered by Ezra; the savage revengefulness of many psalms—these are but a few instances from a long catalogue. Use and wont have made our perceptions obtuse at home, else we should not still be giving prizes to children for reading the Bible through. But in the mission field these things stand out in all their native literalness. In China at least they stand in painful contrast to the decorum of native writings that originated in the same ancient periods, and they produce questionings always, and undisguised revulsion often. I recall how an old Christian quietly collected and concealed scripture portions containing so innocent a narrative as the Book of Ruth after we missionaries had distributed them. It was God's truth, we said, and God would take care of it. It would be well if the Old Testament were not published in its entirety for general circulation, but in compends. The only healthy reaction upon much of the narrative is disgust, repudiation, the same as if the offense were in the Vedas instead of inside Bible covers, but this reaction is difficult on the supposition that the Bible is the inspired rule for our life and conduct.

3. The view of the exclusively Hebrew inspiration stands athwart some of the noblest religious conceptions the modern world has reached. A truth long discerned obscurely but now gripping the world with a fixed conviction, is the immanent presence of God. Present in the universe everywhere, but above all, present in men, growing with their growth and strengthening with their strength, rejoicing in their attainments, grieving over their failures, but never taking his presence from them. And this pervasive Presence, this God with us, has been from the beginning the sole means of such advance as the race has registered, the pledge of future advancement transcending all power of thought.

This conviction renders impossible the conception of an exclusively Judean divine activity, a limited interest of God in peoples of other lands and ages. The modern man is a missionary because he believes that God has the same impartial love for the baby born on the Yangtse or the Thames as for the baby cradled by the Nile or the Jordan, the same regard for Illinois, Sze Chuen, or Telugu, as for Ephraim, Benjamin, or Judah. God has in all ages expressed

his thoughts through the sages of Occident or Orient as really as through the men of that great little land where East and West meet—just as really, even though not as deeply or completely. We need again a Book of the Prophet Jonah to smite our Jewish-Christian conceit and remind us that none of us is the exclusive object of the regard of heaven. It was God who spoke the Golden Rule through the lips of the Chinese sage. It was God who, in the Upanishads, taught that the law of sacrifice was the law by which the worlds were built and by which they are maintained. The early Christians with a truer heart felt no jealousy toward sages outside the sacred circle: the same divine spirit spoke in Socrates and Plato as in Isaiah and John. Truth should surely be known by its hall-mark, not by the book in which it may be printed. Why extol the glorious prophetic peace lyrics of Isaiah and fail to honor the Spirit of God in the modern prophet of the stilled war-drums and the furled battle-flags? Why say Micah was God-inspired when he demanded judgment and justice and the rights of the poor man, and withhold the like ascription from the Scottish peasant bard who in one of humanity's darkest hours dared hail the day "When man to man, the world o'er, shall brothers be"?

If God be father of all it is as impossible to believe in the Bible as the sole written depository of the Spirit of God as in the condemnation of the heathen which once we were constrained to believe it taught.

4. The tardy and grudging recognition of modern science on the part of some interpreters of the Bible has caused a wholly needless controversy of a generation's standing between the Bible and science, the unhappy outcome being the alienation of a too large portion of the schoolmaster class from the church, though not, it is believed, from Christianity. Do the true interests of the Bible require us to continue in the new East this attitude of suspicion and distrust toward science? If so, the revolt of the schoolmaster class will there be universal. At home many things hold discontent within limits—use and wont, the hallowing of sanctuary associations, religious convictions too deep to allow of one's being shaken from the church. Abroad kindly accessories are absent, and the English language is filling the reading-tables of ten thousand schools and colleges. Must

the boys in our missions, like the boys in our home Sunday schools, be brought up on conceptions of the Bible such that when they go to the university and hear of evolution they will "lose their faith"?

The assurance that mankind was not "wrecked in being launched," as those must hold it was who base Christian theology on the stories of Genesis, rather than on the teachings of Jesus, but that we have come safely thus far under the ceaseless urging of the Spirit of God, is a part of the debt we owe to the modern study of evolution. We have no nobler truth to carry abroad. Religion and science are absolutely at one, and like two friendly empires they unyieldingly refuse to be drawn into conflict, though it must be confessed there are hot heads on both sides. Since both seek the truth of God, why continue the tradition of an alienation, an incompatibility? Quite naturally there is a feeling that "conflicts between religion and science" do not arise on the mission field, few there hearing of science. No more fatal mistake could be made. The East may once have been kindergarten to the West, but that day is far past. Our missionaries must bring their message to scientists in every department of research, to the strategists who organized the victory of Tsushima Straits, to statesmen charged with the rehabilitation of China, to the leaders of the New India, to armies of students rapidly taking rank with any of our own. With what sentiment must these men regard a conception of our sacred books that would negative fundamentals of science as obvious as the alphabet? And how immeasurable the advantage if the artificial breach between science and the Bible might on the mission field be forever unknown and unimagined!

5. We should be perilously near to a great revulsion abroad if inadequate conceptions of the Bible should be broken in upon by unfriendly voices telling our people the conceptions they had been taught were at home outworn and being discarded. When Robert Ingersoll stumped the land, heaping cheap ridicule on religion, his whole stock in trade consisted in petty discrepancies of scripture, the alleged responsibility of Christianity for the barbarisms and uncouthnesses of ancient Semitic tribes. His blast would have been as harmless as a tin whistle if right conceptions of scripture had been prevalent. Oriental Ingersolls will undoubtedly drive our converts in multi-

tudes from their moorings unless they are forestalled by a candid and unreserved impartation of the new light which, as if in answer to the prayer of the Pilgrims, is breaking forth from the Scriptures.

How, therefore, positively, should we conceive of the Scriptures in relation to modern missionary work?

The Scriptures are the world's great book of religious experience. As the present age, as Professor Peabody points out, is deeply conscious of its destiny to find solutions of the social problems of life so the Hebrew race was conscious of God. That sense of God which in other races was secondary, sometimes incidental, often acknowledged shamefacedly if at all, with the Hebrews stood in the forefront, avowed with a passionate unreserve. Religion is and ever must be the deepest sentiment of mankind, all covering up, all half-hearted confession to the contrary notwithstanding. The Hebrews differed from most others in that they did not attempt to conceal from themselves nor from anyone else, their absorbed interest in this primal passion. From the sallying forth of their first adventurer down to the travels of their great missionary, the Hebrews carried wherever their wanderings led them the consciousness that God was in that place. Whither should they go from his presence? Whatever else they might do either good or bad, the characteristic of their national life was that they made religion the serious business of life.

Being uppermost in life, religion became uppermost in their records and memoirs also; just as the keynote of the memoirs of other races might be the artistic, the philosophical, or the legal. It is the uniqueness and intensity of the religious element of these records, including especially their continuation in the New Testament, that constitutes them the repository of religious experience to all ages. Experiences with God; life from the point of view of the presence of God and of conformity to his will—this is what life was to them. The national ideal was to know God. "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me." Sowing and reaping, buying and selling, ruling the nation, caring for the helpless, marrying and being born, living and dying—everything was done with reference to the presence and wish of the Deity. The rough sanctity of the tribal god roughly maintained;

the coarse facts of defilement coarsely and effectively kept in evidence; the intoxicated ravings of early wandering bands of seers and soothsayers; the over-lordship of God painfully learned by self-imposed exactions to support the institutions of religion; misconceptions and unworthy views gradually passing into the loftiest spirituality—such as this made up the life of Israel. A galaxy of prophets and sages any one or two of whom would give luster to the annals of a nation, contributed each his experience of God: Isaiah, undaunted confidence; Jeremiah, the secret of personal converse; Hosea, the possibilities of God's forgiving mercy; Deutero-Isaiah, the service of God by self-devotion on behalf of one's fellows; Jonah, learning that the compassion of God knew no difference between Hebrew and heathen; the book of Job maintaining even to impiety a titanic revolt against the literalistic orthodoxy of the times that the good man is rewarded by the favor of God and may be known by a count of herds, while the "visitation" of disaster is the sure sign of sin; the social conscience growing from the point where a man was nailed to the doorpost a slave forever if he loved wife and children too much to leave them, up to where slavery becomes forever impossible. And, finally, the culmination of the race and of the utterances of their scriptures in Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet of the infinite love of the Father and of self-sacrificing love and brotherhood among all men.

I conceive that this evolution throughout the Scriptures, by toilsome and painful steps, from superstition to spirituality, paralleling the evolution in material nature, constitutes them the world's great book of religion: yet that the truth attained was wrought out in Judea in the same way as in India, or China, or America, by experience and observation, by the use of the mental and spiritual faculties with which all men are endowed. Not speaking now of the Christ, if the men of Judea gained more of truth it is because they used better their resources. If it is asked, Why were resources used better in Judea than in China? it may be enough to ask again, Why more of the sense of beauty, more philosophy, or more law, in one nation than in another?

The authority of the Scriptures on the mission field, as elsewhere, if they were in the rabbinical sense a written communication from

God, would be that of God's audible voice. The advantage to the missionary, if he can have at command a series of divine utterances applicable to every subject and emergency, is obvious. To obey scripture is to obey God. To disregard scripture is to defy God. To follow reason when it leads to results differing from scripture is free thought and is impious. Energies must be directed toward establishing the text of the original documents and ascertaining their exactest shade of meaning; this may be difficult to find, but when found it is the *Kol Yahwē*, the Voice of God. Reason, to which Paul appealed to prove all things, must come down from her throne and give meek ear, like the penitent at Canossa, receiving as her own messages spoken to other men, in other ages, amid circumstances the most we know of which is that they were widely or totally different from those of the present day. When we read of a prophet's bones bringing dead men to life, reason may not intimate that the narrative may be a pious legend. When we are told how the archangel Michael and the devil disputed over the dead body of Moses, we may not say it is an old wives' fable. We may exercise ourselves only in finding some "sense" in which the impossible may conceivably be true; for true it must be, otherwise it were not in Holy Writ. The question can never be, Is a certain thing true? Does it harmonize with the highest ideals of life and thought? Or does it, on the other hand, awaken the repugnance and revolt of mind and spirit? The sole question competent for us to ask is, What is the teaching of scripture? That found, nothing remains; God has spoken, who shall make the reply?—even if we fail of being convinced that the sound we heard was really his voice. An officially authoritative pope does not more effectually play the usurper over men's minds than does a mechanically authoritative book. Living religion is the presence of God in the heart of man. A mechanical scriptural authority tends to sap the life of true religion, telling us that the familiar formula, "thus saith the Lord," certifies the veritable mandate of God. It saves trouble, indeed, to repose upon authority, either of pope or of book. But the repose is stupefying and tends to forgetfulness of the real presence, the God within. May God speak to the soul of man? In other times he did, and in the Holy Land; theoretically he may now; but if the things he would communicate

to me have already been committed to a pope or a book, then let me go to pope or book. Such a course is obvious and easy. But bringing the soul face to face with a book is a poor substitute for bringing it face to face with God. When the religion of authority is given the place of honor the religion of the spirit relapses into silence or is relegated to enthusiasts and fanatics. Yet God is not absent. He needs no viceroy and has appointed none. He can himself speak, and does speak, in the hearts of men. The deepest message of the Bible is that he desires to communicate with us personally.

The function of the scriptures is not one of authority, in the external use of the term. The seat of authority is already held by the conscience, the inner light, the divine within the human. Jesus did not speak with a weight of compelling force, bearing down opposition. His authority was the voice of the divine within him awaking the divine within his hearers, deep calling unto deep. The authority possessed by the Scriptures is of the same kind, in virtue of their recording the words of Jesus and of others of like spirit. The Scriptures thus give voice to God, in the true and sole way possible, not by a vocalization as of mechanical records, but by the living utterance of a thousand spokesmen, each repeating the message registered in his own spirit. The men of the Bible have trodden well-nigh every path and sounded well-nigh every note, of religious experience. They are to us for example, good or ill, for warning, exhortation, for inspiration, that we may be allured to duplicate their experiences, or warned to flee them.

Why should it be thought that the Scriptures can be strengthened by ascribing to them an authority more divine than this? The proposed ascription weakens rather than strengthens. The sun shines by its own light. When a soul recognizes a Bible message as being a word of God, to that soul it is a word of God. Until thus discerned it is not authoritative and there is no means by which it can be made so. The Scriptures need no *imprimatur*. Each writer speaks for himself. If his message is weighty with the thought of God, the soul recognizes its divinity. If it be a thing of straw, the soul knows that also. Decking in the robes of authority is needless in the one case, and in the other it is useless—unless with the ignorant and the somnolent, those who prefer to save trouble by

delegating their thinking. If with Luther I hold a certain scripture to be straw, any person may convince me of the authority of the passage by exhibiting the divine thought which I failed to discern; and to whatever degree the divine thought is shown to that degree my spirit recognizes its supremacy. But lacking such demonstration it cannot appeal with the voice of authority to me.

Those have surely an inadequate conception of the majesty of scripture who think to support by their certification of authority its superiority to other religious literature. There is more of personal communion with the divine in a chapter or paragraph taken at random from Jeremiah or John than in all the Dialogues of Plato; more sense of the defilement of sin inculcated in a chapter of the levitical purgations than in all the lustrums of Rome; a deeper sense of personal guilt in the fifty-first psalm than exists in modern literature.

It is piteous to scan the list of hindrances that restrain spiritual adherents of the ethnic religions from giving adhesion to Christianity. Sometimes it is the extra-cosmic conception of God exhibited in the Genesis creation stories; sometimes a difficulty with the Incarnation; or a theory of the Trinity; or of Redemption; or doubts about the miracles. Almost all are traceable to false and indefensible conceptions of the meaning or the nature of the Scriptures. When we can cast ourselves on the truth that religion is not adhesion to doctrine, but is God's life in the human spirit, made more abundant through Jesus; and on conceptions of scripture that give freedom of thought without imposing the sanctions of supernatural authority, obstacles will be removed that hinder the interpenetration of the world with the influence of Jesus Christ.